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March 12, 2007

Contact:

Judith Ingram, Communications Director,

*(202) 523-3240 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting (202) 523-3240 end_of_the_skype_highlighting
, ext. 127*

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom emphasizes its grave concern about the growing Iraqi refugee crisis that has seen more than 1.8 million people displaced from their homes inside Iraq and close to 2 million forced to take refuge outside their homeland. The Commission has raised this issue repeatedly in recent years and urges the U.S. government to take decisive action to accommodate more Iraqi refugees in this country.

The Commission notes with interest that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently established a task force on Iraqi refugees and that the U.S. agreed to take in up to 7,000 displaced Iraqis this year and increase the amount of aid to refugees living in countries neighboring Iraq. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees is convening a conference in April to address the humanitarian and protection needs of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. We call on the U.S. to take a leadership role in this conference.

Yet the Commission regards these measures as inadequate to respond to the alarming situation and calls on the U.S. government to do more.

“The United States must act immediately to identify the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees and move quickly to resettle them in the United States,” said Felice D. Gaer, chair of the Commission.

Among the most vulnerable are Chaldo-Assyrians, Sabeen Mandaeans and Yazidis, who

make up a disproportionately large number of refugees from Iraq. These religious minorities report that they are targeted because they do not conform with Muslim practices or are perceived as working for the U.S.-led multinational forces. Members of these communities have been targeted in violent attacks, including murder, torture, abductions for ransom and reportedly for forced conversion, rape and destruction of community property. Additionally, in the sectarian strife that has engulfed Iraq, members of many Muslim communities have suffered attacks by their rivals.

According to the Iraqi Ministry for Migration and Displacement, nearly half the members of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities have fled abroad. The UNHCR estimates that these minorities, who account for 3 percent of the population, comprise about a third of the Iraqis who have sought sanctuary outside their country.

“As a nation founded by those fleeing repression, we must find room in our hearts and communities to help these uprooted people,” Gaer said.

The Commission recommends that the U.S. State Department:

- develop strategies for protecting vulnerable religious minorities within Iraq;
- urgently consider opening a priority category that would accelerate the processing of asylum applications from Iraqi minority members and would not require referral from the UNHCR, which can be time-consuming. Options include P-2 categorization for members of particularly vulnerable groups and expanded family reunification efforts for refugees with relatives in the United States;
- ensure that Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities scheduled to be resettled to the U.S. are not unnecessarily delayed because of lengthy background screening procedures, and implement a policy that actions taken under duress do not constitute material support for terrorism, which is a bar to refugee resettlement; and
- work with the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to begin conducting in-country processing for vulnerable Iraqis who are unable to safely leave the country.

The Commission urges the U.S. Congress to:

- fully fund the \$20 million budget request from the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration to increase the ability to resettle Iraqi refugees in the United States; and

- provide the State Department with the funds necessary to contribute to and encourage other nations to contribute funds to the UNHCR so that the organization receives the full \$60 million requested for its special appeal on Iraq.

Finally, the Commission urges the U.S. government to encourage the UNHCR to:

- ensure that vulnerable groups such as religious minorities have access to UNHCR and to consideration for resettlement;
- resume for all Iraqis full Refugee Status Determinations in Turkey and invigorate refugee registrations in Syria and Jordan;
- substantially increase the number of referrals to the United States and other resettlement countries in order to preserve first asylum through burden sharing, to protect the most vulnerable refugees, and to reunite refugees with their families; and
- convene a regional conference to address the Iraqi refugee problem, ensuring that Turkey, Syria and Jordan are included.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent, bipartisan federal agency established by Congress in 1998 to review violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad.

In 2004, the Commission raised with President George W. Bush the drastic effect of escalating religious violence on Iraq's ancient Christian and other minorities. We heard more about the downward spiraling situation from representatives of Iraqi Chaldo-Assyrian refugees with whom a Commission delegation met in Turkey last fall.

We then wrote to Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky about the urgent need to provide members of religious minorities who have fled Iraq with access to the U.S. refugee program. In December, the Commission published an op-ed on the subject in *The Washington Times*, which helped spur Congressional hearings and led to the decision to establish the task force on Iraqi refugees.

We are convinced that now is the time for urgent action on protecting Iraqi religious minorities both inside and outside their homeland.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Felice D. Gaer

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